

Challenges Facing Cross-Sectarian Political Parties and Movements in Lebanon

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Saying that Lebanon is a country of paradoxes has become a real cliché and a sound political analysis cannot be based on clichés. There is however one paradox that is worth studying: at the same time an increasing number of people say that Lebanon's sectarian system is no longer viable, while election results, opinion research and popular rhetoric show that sectarianism is as vibrant as ever.

Looking at the Lebanon's political development, since the Independence and more strikingly after the end of the civil war, five major flaws can easily be identified, regardless of one's ideological or sectarian affiliation:

- 1- There is no common scale of values creating a shared understanding of what democracy, citizenship or politics are. Elections are nothing but a 4-year assessment of the size of sectarian communities and the balance of power among the eighteen of them, instead of a constructive competition of political ideas.
- 2- Sectarian polarization has reached unprecedented levels. Sects and their affiliated political parties have become a must-use channel not only to form government institutions, but also to obtain basic rights and services, and to shape citizens' perceptions of other sects, their own identity and state institutions. Sects are the intermediary between citizens and the state at all levels of public and private life.
- 3- Use of violence – despite lip service denial – is accepted by every community to preserve its perceived unity and protect its alleged rights.
- 4- Sects' domination of state institutions translates into their full control of public space, including public lands, the education system, or security apparatuses. The state is relinquishing its sovereignty to sects, abandoning its arbitration role when disputes occur between groups, leading – after each crisis – to deals brokered by foreign powers.
- 5- Protection of confessional rights is in fact a protection of client-patron relations and comprehensive networks of corruption and nepotism.

These flaws are inherent to the confessional political system. With such obvious problems, why have secular and cross-sectarian parties and movements failed at winning people's hearts and minds?

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While all politics is an obstacle course, Lebanon adds five more obstacles to the race for any group that aims to pursue a non-sectarian way of doing politics: the credibility challenge, the history challenge, the identity challenge, the fear challenge and the election challenge.

The credibility challenge

Speaker Nabih Berri, leader of the 100% Muslim Shia Amal Movement, is also the spearhead of the call for abolishing political sectarianism in Lebanon. That is enough of a hint to what the ‘credibility challenge’ is. Most political parties in Lebanon claim to work for a non-confessional country, some even use the word ‘secular’. The secular Free Patriotic Movement thrives on retrieving Christian rights, and granting the largest Christian bloc in parliament the right to choose all Christian cabinet ministers, although the constitution gives cabinet formation rights to the President of the Republic and the Prime Minister. Most parties, dominated by a certain sect, pretend they are not confessional through a façade of high ranking members who do not belong to the party leader’s sect. This is the case of the mainly Sunni Future Movement with its two Christian vice-presidents, or a couple of Muslims on the leadership board of some Christian traditional parties such as the National Bloc or the National Liberal Party.

The history challenge

The attempts to form cross-sectarian and/or secular movements in Lebanon are not new. The Constitutional Bloc was in the 1940s the largest parliamentary bloc in the country, and included the founding fathers of Lebanon’s Independence, President Bechara el-Khoury and Prime Minister Riyad el-Solh. Yet, their most important achievement was the 1943 National Pact that asserted the sectarian nature of the regime, which shows that working through a non-sectarian framework does not necessarily reflect non-sectarian aspirations.

One of the oldest secular Lebanese parties, still active in today’s politics, is the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP). SSNP founded in 1932 calls for the establishment of a Greater Syria (including present Kuwait, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan and Cyprus) with various commonalities with nationalist, even fascist parties that were growing in Europe at the time. The party is fundamentally built on the personality cult of its founder and leader Antoun Saadeh, and is the only political group that ever engaged in a coup d’Etat attempt in Lebanon in 1961. Moreover, SSNP suffered various internal conflicts and divisions, and engaged in the civil war through a strong, feared militia, which quickly became aligned with the Syrian regime (although its activities were for long banned in Damascus and resumed only recently).

The Communist Party is another established political group in Lebanon. The Communists attracted in the 1960s and 1970s significant support among students, intellectuals in addition to the working class, but lost most of it as the party remained stuck in pre-Perestroika rhetoric. They also were involved in the civil war, alongside Palestinian factions and various Muslim militias. The end of the war coincided with the collapse of the Soviet bloc. Attempts from within the party to adapt its internal processes and political discourse to the new realities failed, and the

reformist branch was either sidelined in the mid-1990s or defected to launch what became in 2004 the Democratic Left Movement.

These examples concretize the ‘history challenge’. In many people’s mind, secular parties refer to groups with abstract ideologies, driven by interests that transcend Lebanese borders, are manipulated by outside forces, and no longer respond to nowadays’ challenges. The involvement of these parties in the war, allied with sectarian parties, added a credibility liability to the already heavy historical baggage. Furthermore, these parties failed to respond to the aspiration of many Lebanese who do not want to choose between secularism and a liberal economy, or between secularism and their country’s sovereignty within its recognized borders.

The identity challenge

The ‘identity challenge’ refers to how each party defines itself. Parties spend years debating whether they are secular or non-sectarian or cross-sectarian or civil... Yet, none has done the most basic focus group research to see what echo these different words have in regular people’s minds.

Also part of the identity challenge is whether these groups want to engage in policy development or in office seeking or in both. Some parties, realizing their meager chance to win elections, pretend they only want to be policy influencers. Then, what does make them any different from NGOs or think-tanks?

Elitism is also an obstacle secular parties face under the ‘identity challenge’. Feeling they cannot compete with the sectarian rhetoric traditional parties use to mobilize wide popular support, issue-based political parties focus on a constituency limited to the highly educated upper-middle class and above. This assumption places cross-sectarian parties in the vicious circle of engaging with an ever-shrinking base of members, voters and surrogates.

The fear challenge

Non-sectarian parties have to address both made up and legitimate fears.

Sectarian entrepreneurs thrive on convincing their communities that they are under attack, and that fortresses are the only way to protect the group. The reaction to such fears often leads to self-fulfilling prophecies, as the same attitude prevails across confessions. Lebanon for example has gone through at least five major sectarian conflicts (including 16 years of civil war) in 150 years. Instead of contemplating the idea of reforming a system that has enabled conflicts, Lebanese deepen their sectarianism after each crisis. Non-sectarian political parties face a dilemma: launching a war memory endeavor is the only way to heal wounds that fuel sectarianism, but is not advisable from an electoral perspective on the short term.

Another fear to address is especially salient among Christians. Historically, calls for abolishing political sectarianism have mostly come from Muslim-led parties. Lebanese Christians suspect

parties that claim to support a non-confessional system of seeking Muslim control over state institutions, depriving Christians from their historical privileges. The non-sectarian parties' alliance with armed Palestinian factions in the late 1960s and during the civil war is also still present among mainstream Christians and places anti-sectarianism at odds with sovereignty. The perceived demographic growth of the Shia community, represented by an armed Hezbollah, increased the attachment to the status quo among most Hezbollah opponents, from all sects.

Fear also comes from social and economic difficulties Lebanese are facing. Without engaging in conspiracy theories and accusing sectarian factions of deepening Lebanon's economic problems to remain the only path for people to obtain social services, one cannot ignore the strength of education, health and employment networks managed by confessional groups. In a country where the public administration suffers from chronic inefficiency, it is much easier for people to go through sectarian channels to reach their basic rights. Many in Lebanon fear that civic options for social services will fail to deliver what is made available today through sectarian ways and means.

The election challenge

Any party that does not seek popular legitimacy through elections cannot claim to be democratic. Yet elections under the current system pose a real challenge for cross-sectarian political parties. Lebanon's block vote system favors sectarian leaders who have enough support in their district to ensure the victory of all the candidates they endorse. Districts have also varying sizes. When 10,000 votes are enough to win a seat in a certain district, a candidate with 100,000 votes in another district might well lose.

Electioneering also greatly favors traditional parties. There are no official ballots for instance in Lebanon. Political parties print their ballots in a way that their agents during the count can recognize the provenance of each paper, thus violating voter secrecy. Well-established traditional parties have mastered these techniques and can therefore exert pressure on voters.

Elections in Lebanon are also among the most expensive in the world. The New York Times wrote that 750 million dollars were spent during the 2009 parliamentary election (in a country of 2 million voters). Only traditional sectarian parties, with strong foreign sponsor-states can afford such expenses.

Within this operating environment, non-sectarian political parties are either condemned to lose or forced to ally with sectarian political parties, which undermines the credibility of their political discourse. Without seats in the parliament, access to media becomes difficult and cross-sectarian parties' chance to spread their message and influence policy weakens.

Modern, post-war, cross-sectarian political groups – starting with my own party, the Democratic Renewal Movement – have two options left. The first one is to complain about all the external factors hindering our ability to get our message across (the electoral system, the role of money in

Lebanese politics, the cartel structure of media outlets, foreign support for big sectarian parties) and wait until one or two of our members strike a deal with a confessional group to run on joint electoral lists as the only occasion to be in the news. We will then join the club of respected political groups who are only remembered with nostalgia among some elite circles, and appear alongside the 1960s-1970s ephemeral Democratic Party or Awakening Movement in a foreign student's thesis on Lebanese political movements.

The second option is to focus on intrinsic challenges, i.e. strengthening our credibility through consistency; highlighting in deeds not in words our difference with failed previous cross-sectarian political attempts; better communicating our solutions and involving people of all backgrounds in developing our political platforms; and strengthening our internal democracy as a model of what we are offering to the society. All these steps may still be not enough to induce change in the system, but will at least give us stronger democratic weapons to face competition, with a house in order and better chances to grab opportunities when they are occasionally presented.

Most if not all traditional sectarian political players in Lebanon are deeply connected to foreign autocratic regimes in the Middle East, who may be today facing their last moments. Change in the region will inevitably lead to change in Lebanon, as traditional forces may lose their foreign sponsors. At that moment, if modern cross-sectarian parties are not ready to step up to the plate, there will be nobody else to blame but ourselves.